

As the organist completed the hymn, the vision seemed slowly to ascend and he awoke from his reverie. His eyes searched in vain for the old woman, and they turned toward the altar and then slowly upward.

Description of a City

Walter Maynes

IT WAS the midst of summer and the war was over. Eager to get home, we patiently waited for orders that would send us back to the States. We did not mind waiting, because during the summer Italy was the garden of the world. The Mediterranean lulled in its summer sleep and the gentle slopes of the majestic Appennines made this country an ideal place in which to recuperate from the horrors of war. We had nothing to do but relax, until our orders came.

It was on one of these relaxing days that I decided to walk through the hills to one of the neighboring towns. As I approached a road, a wooden sign with black, hastily written figures on it indicated that it was five kilometers to Presna. The air was cool and refreshing. I walked slowly and thought about going home. Then, off in the distance, I heard the faint hesitating music of a mandolin. I have heard the mandolin many times in Italy, but this time the national instrument was in gifted hands. As the winding road straightened, a small boy appeared at the roadside.

He was perched on an empty ammunition box, and carefully placed before him, on the ground, was an old cap. Hearing me approach, he struck up a gay peasant song, but somehow his sad voice did not match the lyrics. I stood still and watched him play. He was a handsome boy about eleven years old. His delicate features and curly hair gave him a somewhat regal appearance. He could have passed for a legendary prince, but there was one defect. He was blind.

When I spoke to him, he stopped singing and turned toward me. I learned that his name was Gino. It was Gino Antonio Alfredo De Maria to be exact, for his father, not unlike most peasants believed that this splendid youth would someday need an eminent-sounding name. As we talked I also learned that he was left blind and orphaned by the war. Then he asked me where I was from, and I told him New York City.

"New York City? I was there once," he replied in a heavily accented voice. "It was for my eyes. The doctor said I would never see again. He didn't charge me for his work. He was a good fellow."

Eager to discuss my home town, I asked, "What did you think of the big city, Gino?"

"You know," Gino began, "That town reminded me of a marvelous concert."

"How so?" I quizzed.

"Well, as I entered the harbor of the city, I heard people cheering as we passed the Statue of Liberty. I imagined this tall lady in her green flowing garments was ushering us into a huge concert hall. Since we had arrived early, we could hear the musicians tuning their instruments. They were instruments which emitted strange sounds. However, they all went into creating the orchestral cry of the city.

"The first sounds I heard were the deep throated tubas. They sounded vigorously as we entered the harbor. The men who played them must have been big, because they made a tremendous sound. They continued tuning for a long time. Then everything was silent for a while.

"Afterwards, the violin virtuosos placed their instruments on their shoulders and began to tune up. As we approached a busy intersection, we heard their sounds. They shrieked and squealed. Then they hesitated a few moments, and they shrieked and squealed again. In the background now and then I could hear a shrill whistle. It could have been a flute, I thought, but it sounded too rough.

"Suddenly, a rumble filled the air. It came from overhead, and that too came at certain intervals. At first, the sound became audible off in the distance, and then it grew louder as it approached. It tugged and squealed and finally came to a halt. I thought this was surely a strange way for a percussion section to sound, but I remembered this was an American concert.

"Then everyone began murmuring something about 'tall and massive!' I heard someone exclaim it was a hundred stories high! Another person explained that every morning at sunrise this colossal being would, upon awakening, stretch his arms toward the sky. He is 'famous all over the world for his majestic appearance from the ocean. 'Ah!' I thought, 'this at last must be the conductor'."

Gino talked rapidly now, and he smiled like a boy who was just promised a piece of chocolate cake. I listened in silence as he went on.

"When this immense conductor tapped his baton everything grew still. In a moment the orchestral cry of the city rose in a roaring crescendo. The music was strangely beautiful. The tempo was governed by millions of passing footsteps, as they scurried in all directions. The tempo always remained the same, always andante.

"Then, in the back ground, an aria became audible. The tenor's voice wasn't of the best quality, but it was lusty and from the heart. He sang in my language. I mean as I would, if I were to sing in English. His song was gay. The lyrics said something about ripe fresh fruit. He sounded as though he was glad to be in the 'Big City'.

"This concert started at the same time everyday, and everyday the same music was played."

Gino stopped now and apologized for not giving me an opportunity to speak. We bade each other farewell, and as I began to leave, Gino tugged at my sleeve. Then he pointed to the old hat on the ground.

“Hey, Joe, don’t forget to put something in the hat.”

Now, whenever I grow tired of New York, I take a long walk in the morning, just gazing at the colossal maestro and listening to the wondrous concert.